



***Tu Bishvat* and Birthday of the Knesset:**

An article written by the NFTY Shaliach, Hanan Cidor

When I was younger, *Tu BiSh'vat* always marked two things to me – the day when we all get the middle of year report card and a time where there will be a class field trip to go and plant trees. This tradition in Israel, unique and exceptional in its scope, has been around since even before the country was established.

Since the early days of the Zionist settlement in the land of Israel, Jews who were a people without a land aspired to inhabit and grow the place of their fore fathers. One of the best ways to do that other than establishing new villages, kibbutzim and even cities, was to plant trees and plants all across the country, symbolizing our eternal connection to it. Today, 61 years after the declaration of independence, Israel is proud to be the only country in the world with an almost constant net growth of trees. In a world that is desperately battling to preserve itself from the dangers and threats of global warming, that's nothing short than amazing.

The planting of trees symbolizes more than just connection and dedication to the land. To me and many others it is a part of a larger way of thinking and perspective that teaches us about our responsibility to make everything around us, including nature itself, a better more prosperous place. Whether you see it as an actual order from god or just the wisdom of the time and of our people, one cannot ignore god's order to Adam when laying out his responsibilities in the Garden of Eden – “*L'ovda U'leshomra*” - to work and preserve it. By dedicating one day to thinking and acting solely for nature's sake, whether in Israel or outside of it, I believe we are being truthful to our heritage.

While *Tu BiSh'vat* is all about our connection to nature and the world around us, in Israel we also celebrate a very different yet in my eyes very appropriate occasion – the birthday to the Knesset.

Exactly 61 years ago the Israeli House of Representatives convened for the first time in an act that marked the beginning of the modern Israeli democracy. In a true attempt to create a model Jewish society in the holy land, forming a legislative body that represents the people of the land in the most open way was and still is a crucial part of the project. I will be the first one to say (and such is the case in virtually all of the western democratic regimes) that there are a lot of things to be disappointed about when it comes to the Israeli government and Knesset. But when I put things in perspective I can't stop myself from appreciating the wonderful progress that has been made and the adherence to our core democratic beliefs over a period of time that was very troublesome to say the least. The fact that despite all of the hardship we remain loyal to our democratic values is truly a cause for celebration, especially in order to demonstrate that this is a core element of who we are as a people.

Both of these occasions, *Tu BiSh'vat* and the birthday to the Knesset can mistakenly be considered as very Israeli holydays and not so much related to the Jewish community in other places. I however believe that assumption to be wrong. The way I see it whether or not you live in Israel, as important of a question to be asked personally, has nothing to do with being able to celebrate Israeli holidays. Once you see yourself as a devoted and involved Jew, the connection to what's going on in Israel, in triumph and in sorrow should be part of your life since this immense project called Israel belongs to all of us and should be celebrated that way. The amount of involvement in what's going on is completely up to the individual, and no one else gets to tell him what he should do with it.

Enjoy the celebrations,

Hanan.